

The Ritual of the Mask: Allie McGhee at the Belle Isle Viewing Room

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Allie McGhee is a Detroit based artist who has been described as a painter and abstractionist. Often when speaking about his work, he refers to jazz as one of his central inspirations. As a type of music characterized by its playful rhythms and improvisation, this highlights McGhee's particularly freeing way of seeing, interacting with and responding to the world around him. It also highlights a certain attitude that he has in relation to autonomy of movement and form, because of course the emergence of jazz in the United States actively participated as a form of protest in the 1920's and 30's during the time of prohibition and the ongoing Jim Crow laws¹. At that time, jazz was described as "devil's music" or "music used to scare off bears"². The unease that came with the emergence of jazz seemed to primarily be a result of a lack of structure, a resistance to rules, an embrace of improvisation and reacting to moments in life with raw and intuitive responses. Despite jazz living its most infamous life in the 20's and 30's when it was the most controversial because of the novelty of its approach to composition, it has continued to demonstrate a distinct ability to create new ways of seeing and interacting with the world. It is a kind of music that has stood the test of time as it continues to present innovation and is an inspiration to different forms of music, art and many other creative processes.

An attunement to autonomy and resistance to rules has been consistently demonstrated in the work of Allie McGhee and when analyzing the history of his practice, it can also be important to consider the relevance of the time period in which his career emerged.

Having been a mentee of Charles McGee, who is also often described as an abstract artist, Allie's career seemed to take root through participation in *Seven Black Artists*, an exhibition at the Detroit Artist Market in 1969, just two years after the 1967 Detroit Riots. The group of artists included Charles McGee, Lester Johnson, Henri Umbaji King, Robert Murray, James Lee, Allie McGhee, Harold Neal, and Robert J. Stull. This collective of artists soon after went on to establish Gallery 7, an art exhibition space at 8232 West McNichols³ in Detroit that hosted many different locally and nationally recognized artists including Nancy Brett, McArthur Binion and Michele Oka Doner. A certain way of working was evident throughout the practices of many of the Detroit-based artists that came up around that time. While there was a respect for the continuation of formal paintings on stretched square canvases, there was also a freeing way to use symbols, patterns, textures and form that lets them "leap out of their immediate context into a realm of free play"⁴. This approach to creative production feels illustrated in a very interesting way in Charles McGee's interview with Morgan Meis of the *New Yorker* in 2017...

"Is this primarily an abstract work?' I asked McGee."

"No,' he said."

"You see it as representational, then?"

"No."

"A mix?"

"Not exactly."

"Is this work about Detroit somehow?"

"Yes and no."

"Are these designs coming from African art?"

"Partly."

“Do you see yourself as a Black artist?”

“No.”

“A Detroit artist?”

“No.”

“An American artist?”

“No.”

“But you are all of those things at least in some way, aren't you?”

“Yes. I'm Black, have lived in Detroit most of my life, and am American.”

“But those things don't define you as an artist?”

“He shook his head slowly from side to side.”⁵

Whether it was a lack of interest in being identified in any particular way or resistance to being put into the categorical spaces that make up history, artists like McGee and McGhee have demonstrated a sustained interest in the exploration of the abstraction in art and perhaps also in thought and explanation, applying this process to the forms they used, the spaces they inhabited and the conversations they were having. Allie McGhee's multifaceted approach to creative production allowed him to contribute not only to the canon of painting but to explore the realms of sculpture and large scale public murals as well. These investigations that continue to be at play in his work have most certainly compromised the expected in exchange for experimentation and inventiveness, and in the end, like jazz, this is perhaps what has kept his work interesting and relevant through the years.

Allie has also continued to expand upon his explanations of influences in different ways throughout his career, at one point touching on a developing interest in science and space exploration. “He followed photographic captures from space study taken by the Hubble Telescope, creating paintings that are inspired by astrological forms.”⁶ Despite these relatively clear references by the artist regarding where he gets his imagery and ideas from, the thing that ties the breadth of his work together seems to be more of an elusive representation of the mimetics between the micro and the macro.



The Ritual of the Mask © Image by Runner Magazine

The Ritual of the Mask by Allie McGhee is the first presentation of works to be installed at the Belle Isle Viewing Room, and is accompanied by a brief text:

“The five wall works presented in *The Ritual of the Mask* are intimate paintings made of paper, fiberglass and wood. McGhee refers to these shaped artworks as ‘crushed paintings’. Transgressing the constraints of traditionally stretched canvases, these crushed paintings emerge as symbolic forms. The sixth and final object in the exhibition is an African mask from the artist's personal collection of artifacts. The influence of the African mask is undeniable when viewing McGhee's work. Titles such as *The Ritual of the Mask*, *Blue Face*, and *Sun Down* make us consider what kind of rituals or ceremonies the artist finds sacred in his own studio practice. To the left of the mask and pedestal is *Yellow Dance*, 2005, the first crushed painting McGhee made by manipulating papers found around his studio with layers of acrylic paints. The artworks in his presentation span the four year period of 2005-2009, which laid the groundwork of McGhee's ongoing and expanding series of sculptural paintings.”⁷



The Ritual of the Mask © Image by Runner Magazine

McGhee prompts us to view these works in direct relation to the traditional African mask that is on view as a supportive element in the installation. Imagining each of these paintings as masks themselves can take us into the depths of our imaginations in order to comprehend the conceptual perspective being communicated. The size is relative and in that way, it is not too difficult to relate the paintings to the ancient ritualistic object. But without holes for eyes, a functionality is removed, making way for a much more complex read of the work.

In an attempt to bring meaning to the relationships presented here, I begin with the idea that every painting is a self portrait. But then I abandon that immediate and rather cliché interpretation in order to appreciate more directly the fact that there is actually a real African mask present in this intimate setting for me to take in. It is here, in a modern white cube, presented alongside a series of modern abstract sculptural paintings. I realize in this moment that I am experiencing the future just as science fiction has presented it time and time again, through the coexistence of the old and the new, the premodern and the modern, ritual and capital. It is an impressive trait of any practice to be able to tap into the expanse to this degree, and Allie McGhee has continuously proven to have that knack.



Flight © Image by Runner Magazine



Blue Face © Image by Runner Magazine

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Sun Down © Image by Runner Magazine



Yellow Dance © Image by Runner Magazine



Winter Thaw © Image by Runner Magazine



Traditional African Mask © Image by Runner Magazine

“Allie McGhee (1941) is a native Detroiter who has committed his five-decade career to exploring abstract painting through the lens of cultural and scientific analysis. His work is collected by many public institutions including the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Saint Louis Art Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem (New York), Kohler Arts Center (Wisconsin), the James Lewis Museum at Morgan State University (Maryland) and Henry Ford Hospital (Michigan). In October 2021, the Cranbrook Art Museum will present a retrospective exhibition of McGhee’s long career living and working as a painter.”⁸



The Belle Isle Viewing Room is an off branch of the Pence Fine Art Services business model that serves as a space to share information and knowledge. The goal is to provide an intimate and comfortable setting in order to hold conversations surrounding presented work.

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